

{As Prepared for Delivery}

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**Opening Remarks, Farm Bill Forum
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Thank you, Michelle, [*Michelle Rook, WNAX Radio, Yankton, SD*] for that kind introduction. It's great to be here.

As some of you know, I was born and raised -- and have farmed most of my life -- in Marcus Iowa. That means my great-grandparents didn't make it quite as far west as yours did, but it's still not far from here, and it's great to be back home.

I want to begin by thanking you for turning out today. I'm especially glad to see Senator Thune and Larry Gabriel [*S. Dakota Secretary of Agriculture*] and Governor Rounds here today. Your leadership on agricultural issues makes a big difference, and I appreciate the privilege of working with you to strengthen our rural communities in South Dakota and across the nation.

We're here today to continue a conversation that President Bush and Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns began some time ago. Farm policy has a long history, but things change -- so every four or five years we sit down and rethink where we're going.

The next Farm Bill is due in 2007 but earlier this year, President Bush directed that we get a head start on it. At Secretary Johann's suggestion, part of that effort has been a series of forums just like this, all around the country.

At this point, the next Farm Bill is a blank slate, ready to be written. These forums are therefore an opportunity, right at the front end of the process, to express your ideas and concerns about farm and rural policy. I'm going to step back and let you do most of the talking -- goodness knows, I make plenty of speeches, but this is your chance to inform us and provide input that will influence policy.

Obviously, the next Farm Bill needs to respond to changing circumstances, and we want the ideas of everyone involved with

agriculture and rural communities to help rise to that challenge. We have plenty to talk about.

- We need an efficient and fair support system for producers today, and a system that works for the next generation of farmers -- the young people just starting out.**
- We face increasingly competitive world markets, and we are committed to maintaining America's competitive edge.**
- We are committed to conservation and environmental stewardship.**
- And last but certainly not least, we have enormous challenges and opportunities in rural development, which is the USDA mission area in which I work. We have a full plate:**
 - We need to provide infrastructure and affordable housing for rural communities to grow and prosper.**

- **We need to seize new opportunities in bio-agriculture, renewable fuels, international trade and the growth of foreign markets.**
- **The broadband revolution opens up vistas undreamed of a few short years ago -- extraordinary new opportunities for the diversification of the rural economy.**
- **And we need to help rural communities leverage their assets -- financial assets, human resources, and quality of life advantages -- to build the kind of communities our children and grandchildren will want to call home.**

All of these things – and more – are open for discussion. We certainly don't pretend to have the answers. But we do look forward to an ongoing discussion over the next two years, and I look forward to hearing your thoughts today.